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SUBJECT: NIRUPAMA RAO: A POISED NEW FOREIGN SECRETARY

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: Indian President Patil appointed Nirupama Rao as India,s second female Foreign Secretary. She will take office at the end of the month. A trusted East Asia hand, Rao is a veteran diplomat, known for her poised demeanor; she most recently served as Indian Ambassador to China. Rao will be India,s principal foreign policy official and actively engaged on high-profile issues, from the implementation of the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Initiative to India,s bid for a permanent UN Security Council (UNSC) seat.

#### The Selection of the Foreign Secretary

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[1](#)2. (U) The Foreign Secretary, as the bureaucratic head of the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), acts as India,s principal foreign policy official. The selection of an Indian Ambassador to China (a sensitive post for New Delhi) as Foreign Secretary has now become a trend; her immediate predecessor, Shiv Shankar Menon, and three other predecessors also served as New Delhi,s representative in Beijing. President Pratibha Patil,s announcement of her appointment as Foreign Secretary came as no surprise to Embassy sources. Rao will serve as Foreign Secretary only until December 2010, at which point she faces mandatory retirement, per Indian law, at the age of [1](#)60.

#### Rao,s Likely Focus

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[1](#)3. (U) India,s number one foreign policy priority -- its bid for a permanent seat on the Security Council -- will be an immediate focus. With Prime Minister Singh,s renewed calls for changes to an "anachronistic" global architecture during the June 2009 G-8 plus 5 talks in Italy, Rao will continue to articulate India,s quest for a UNSC seat in the run up to the U.N. General Assembly meetings in September. Indian media analysts hope that Rao,s previous experience working with the Chinese government might assist India in obtaining China,s support for an Indian seat.

[1](#)4. (U) Although the Indian media suggests that Nirupama Rao will play an important role in Indo-Pakistani relations, historically this sensitive bilateral relationship has been conducted from the Prime Minister,s Office and Cabinet. Known as a tough negotiator, Rao will play a key role in the implementation of the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Initiative.

## A History of High-Profile Assignments

15. (U) Serving in several high-profile IFS positions from 1993 to the present day, Nirupama Rao has weathered changes in India's government politics and foreign policy. In 2006, Rao was appointed Indian Ambassador to China and deftly soothed the PRC's anger after Tibetan protesters scaled the walls of the Chinese Embassy in Delhi during the run-up to the 2008 Olympics. Analysts contend that a certain level of trust between the Chinese and Indian governments was cemented during her tenure, as evidenced by the Chinese government allowing Rao to inaugurate an agricultural training center in the province of Ningxia - this is the first example of the Indian government funding a poverty alleviation project in China. Also during her tenure, bilateral trade between India and China doubled, briefly surpassing trade between India and the US, historically India's largest trading partner. Nirupama Rao facilitated the opening of an office in Beijing by the Indian Ministry of Tourism and Culture, tripling the number of people traveling between the two countries.

16. (U) Prior to serving as the first Indian female High Commissioner to Sri Lanka from 2004 to 2006, Rao cemented her reputation of unflappability as the first spokeswoman of the MEA from 2001 to 2004. She was well-received as the public face of the IFS, with the media applauding her "very French" manner of using appropriate words to convey a careful, and eloquent tone. Rao served as Deputy Chief of Mission in

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Russia from 1998 to 2001. India's May 1998 nuclear tests sparked a period of turbulent foreign relations, however Russia's ties to India remained strong; the Russian Foreign Minister was the first foreign official to visit India after the nuclear tests. Rao also served as the Indian Embassy's Minister of Press in Washington D.C. from 1995 to 1998 and as the Indian Ambassador to Peru from 1993 to 1995. Policy experts regard Rao as an East Asia hand, largely due to her tenure as MEA Joint Secretary of East Asia, as Director of the China desk from 1982 to 1984, and as Ambassador to China.

## The Poet Diplomat

17. (U) Rao was born on December 6, 1950, to a Hindu family in Aurangabad, Maharashtra. She earned a Masters Degree in English Literature from Marathwada University and served as a Fellow at the Centre for International Affairs (predecessor of the Weatherhead Centre) at Harvard University from 1992 to 1993. Rao was also a Distinguished International Executive in Residence at the University of Maryland from 1999 to 2000. The local media has given much coverage to the "poet diplomat" Rao, citing her 2004 anthology of poetry, Rain Rising. Rao is married to Sudhakar Rao, a senior Indian Administrative Service officer, currently serving as Chief Secretary in Karnataka. The couple has two sons, Nikhilesh (31) and Kartikeya (21).

## "No Glass Ceiling"

18. (U) Rao graduated from the same 1973 class of the IFS as Meira Kumar, the first female Speaker of the Lok Sabha (lower house of Parliament) (Ref). Like Kumar, Rao is a pioneer for women in India, serving as the first female spokesperson of the MEA and the first female Indian Ambassador to China. The IFS has responded to charges of past gender-based discrimination by advancing female officers to senior positions. However, commenting to the media on her experience in the IFS, Rao responded emphatically: "I have never encountered any glass ceiling."  
ROEMER